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# CONSERVATION OF FUR SEALS

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ON July 7, 1911, there was signed in the city of Washington a treaty between the United States, Great Britain, Japan, and Russia which suspended for fifteen years the hunting of fur seals in the open sea. Had this treaty not been signed, Canadian sealers would to-day be pursuing our fur seals off the California coast and Japanese sealers would in like manner be hunting the seals of Russia, off the coasts of Japan; while in the summer both fleets would unite on the American herd in Bering Sea.

The fur seals have their breeding home in Bering Sea, the American herd on the Pribilof Islands, in the eastern portion of that sea, the Russian herd on the Commander Islands, near the coast of Kamchatka. With the approach of winter they leave the islands for a long migration down through the Pacific Ocean, the American herd to the latitude of Santa Barbara, the Russian herd along the coast of Japan. The downward journey is rapid, the return trip slow, occupying the later winter and spring, and bringing the animals back to their island homes in the latter part of May and early June.

It was the custom of the Indians of the vicinity of Neah-bay, Vancouver Island, and Sitka to go out in their canoes to hunt the stragglers from the herd on the northward journey which came near enough the shore. In 1879 or thereabouts sailing-vessels began to be used to take out the Indians and their canoes, caring for them at night and in time of storm, and enabling them to follow the main body of the herd. The sealing-vessels gradually anticipated the arrival of the herd off the Strait of Fuca by going south to meet it, until finally they came to await it at the turning-

point of its migration, off the Santa Barbara Channel. The principal port for this sealing was Victoria, B. C., but vessels at times sailed from San Francisco, Monterey, and San Diego.

Pelagic sealing proved very destructive to the herd. It respected neither sex nor condition of the animals found, and the catch fell principally upon the gravid and nursing females, the latter taken upon the summer feeding-grounds in Bering Sea; for when the migration route of the seals had been covered the sealers entered Bering Sea and lay in wait for the mother seals as they visited the fishing-banks one to two hundred miles distant from the islands for the purpose of feeding. As a result of the death of the mother the dependent young starved to death on the rookeries. In the fall of 1896 sixteen thousand fur-seal pups died of starvation on the rookeries of St. Paul and St. George islands.

As pelagic sealing developed through the increasing number of ships, its catch grew from 8,000 at the beginning to a maximum of 140,000 in 1894; but this could not last, and with the declining herd the pelagic catch also began to decline. In the season of 1911, the last of the industry, the catch numbered about 15,000 skins. In 1893 the United States and Great Britain reached an agreement in the matter of pelagic sealing which provided for a protected zone of sixty miles radius about the breeding-islands and a close season of three months—May, June, and July. These were binding upon the Canadian sealers, but when the Japanese fleet entered Bering Sea in 1903, they were not bound by this agreement and conducted their operations throughout the summer from the three-mile line with even more destructive effect.

From the known catch of the sealing-fleets and from conservative estimates as to animals killed but not recovered, it is apparent that more than a million breeding female fur seals and a like number of unborn and dependent young were destroyed during the thirty-odd years the pelagic industry has been in operation. The result is the depleted condition in which we find the herd to-day. Our best information places the number of the animals in the herd at the time we took it over from Russia in 1867 at between two and three millions. It numbers to-day about 215,000.

The cause of the herd's decline was, for a considerable

time, a matter of dispute between the United States and Great Britain, but in 1897 a joint conference of fur-seal experts, after two seasons of investigation on the breeding-islands, agreed upon the killing of females inherent in pelagic sealing as the sole cause of the decline and upon the abolition of pelagic sealing as the sole remedy. This required international action and it has taken fifteen years to bring about the desired end, which was accomplished by the treaty of July 7, 1911.

This treaty was a bargain involving give and take. Great Britain and Japan, whose citizens maintained the pelagic industry, agreed to its abandonment. The United States and Russia, owners of the fur-seal herds, agreed to share the product of their land-sealing industries with Great Britain and Japan in reimbursement of their citizens. The percentage of the land catch agreed upon was fifteen per cent. to each nation.

The land sealing concerned in this arrangement is the killing of the superfluous young males, or bachelors. The fur seal is polygamous, the average harem for the season of 1912 numbering sixty females to one male. The sexes are practically equal in the birth-rate of any season. Through fear of the adult males the younger males herd by themselves on separate beaches, beyond the confines of the breeding-grounds. From these beaches they are driven inland, a sufficient reserve for breeding purposes marked and set aside, and the rest killed for their skins. This process of land-sealing has been in operation throughout the period of American control, forty-two years, and the United States has received in royalties from the leasing companies approximately \$10,000,000 for sealskins taken and marketed by them. If pelagic sealing had not intervened to reduce the herd, the income of the Government in the past twenty years would have amounted to \$1,000,000 annually. If the treaty of July 7, 1911, is maintained, the herd will in the next fifteen years—the life of the treaty—have practically recovered its condition of maximum prosperity.

The doubt as to whether this treaty will be allowed to affect its beneficent work of restoration arises from the fact that in the law of August 24, 1912, designed to give effect to the treaty, a suspension of land sealing for five years was provided for. Thus for five years Congress has placed us

in the position of having no land catch to share with Canada and Japan. These nations are dissatisfied and are protesting. Japan has already paid \$560,000 to extinguish the sealing rights of her citizens, which they yielded up unwillingly. The Canadian sealers have been settled with by Great Britain on some effective basis. In the season of 1912 there was absolutely no pelagic sealing. It is an open question whether the patience of these people will survive the five-year period. The industry they yielded up was a valuable one and had taken approximately 300,000 animals from the Pribilof herd in the past fifteen years. These skins were marketed by the sealers at an average price of \$15 each—a total of \$4,500,000. The pelagic sealing nations would seem to have reasonable ground for withdrawal from the treaty. Such withdrawal would be followed by resumption of pelagic sealing, and the ultimate destruction of the herd.

The effect on the treaty, while the most serious consideration, is not the only one. It is not merely possible to remove the superfluous males, but such removal is necessary to the best development of the herd. The breeding life of the animals is at best crowded. The adult bulls are powerful and pugnacious animals of 400 to 500 pounds weight. The cows are animals of about 80 pounds, and the young are comparatively helpless at birth, weighing about 12 pounds. An overstock of males leads to fighting and commotion in the breeding season with consequent injury to the females and their young. The law suspending land sealing, if carried through, will inflict, during the next fourteen years, a stock of 75,000 bulls upon the fur-seal rookeries, of which 63,000 will be wholly superfluous, and the fighting of these bulls will bring heavy damage to the breeding stock. It may be added that these 63,000 animals will have borne, at the age of three years, skins worth to the Government, and to the treaty nations, \$40 each, or approximately \$2,500,000, a clear loss, as the skin of the male seal is commercially worthless after the fourth year of its age.

An incidental but none the less important effect of the suspension of land sealing will be the decimation if not the complete destruction of the blue-fox herd, an important fur-bearing asset of the Pribilof Islands. These animals through a century of habit have come to depend on the offal of the killing-fields for their winter supply of food. This is to be

cut off for five years. The animals cannot migrate. As is their custom when food is scarce, they will prey upon one another, the strong eating the weak, the adults the young. It is possible to feed the animals with dried salmon, whale meat, beef—but it will be a difficult and expensive matter, and the law makes no provision for it.

The suspension of land sealing, as provided for in the fur-seal law of August 24, 1912, is an unnecessary, even harmful measure. It should be repealed at as early a date as possible.

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